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Statement to the House International Relations Committee
on
“The U.S. – ROK Alliance”
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Introduction

Mr. Chairman, members of the Committee, I am very pleased to have been invited to testify before the Committee again to give you an overview of the alliance between the United States and the Republic of Korea (ROK).

First, Mr. Chairman, let me wish you the best in your retirement. As the last World War II combat veteran from the Pacific theater serving in the U.S. House of Representatives you are taking with you into retirement a valuable and important perspective on our relations with East Asia. I know your colleagues have benefited greatly from your substantial experience as have so many of us at the Department of State.

I would like to focus my remarks on the U.S. – Korean Alliance; on the many important issues which we have been able to make essential progress as we update it for the 21st Century. An alliance as important as this one is really a living and growing entity that needs tending and nurturing.

The Republic of Korea is a key ally of the United States in Asia and around the world. Like us, the ROK is dedicated to maintaining regional security and to promoting peace and stability around the globe. But our alliance represents more than a defensive balance of power. It is also a positive force for progress. We now have a historic opportunity to transform our alliance to meet the challenges of the 21st century – including both traditional and new security, economic, and transnational challenges. We are working very closely with the Department of Defense, including my colleague Richard Lawless, to adapt our partnership with the ROK to meet those challenges on the Korean peninsula, in Northeast Asia and around the globe.

The mature global partnership we are forging together now reflects the combined capabilities we bring to bear not just in the military sphere, but also in the political, economic and cultural areas. Today, we view that partnership as a chance to pool our shared goals in the face of new challenges and opportunities, from terrorism to the tsunami relief efforts to HIV/AIDS to our new Asia-Pacific Partnership on Clean Development and Climate.

We want to look ahead and begin to identify further ways in which our two countries can work together to realize our goals and face shared challenges based on the strong bonds of friendship, common political values and economic interdependence.

Shared Security Concerns

As we construct a new partnership, however, it is important we not lose sight of the cornerstone of our alliance over the years: the security of the Republic of Korea. North Korea remains a very real threat – with over a million troops, possibly several nuclear weapons, and a propensity to export all kinds of dangerous things.

But how we do these things is undergoing a tremendous change. For one thing, it is no longer solely the U.S. that dictates the terms of this relationship. It has evolved into a more balanced partnership. Working in concert with Seoul, we are realigning our troops, consolidating our bases, and shifting more responsibility to the ROK's armed forces – all while enhancing our capacity to defend the Peninsula in time of crisis.

We continue to face a number of challenging issues in our military alliance, which I know my colleague, Deputy Undersecretary Lawless, will discuss in greater detail. Our military partnership is no longer the dominant feature of our bilateral relationship but it still remains an important foundation.

The current issue animating both our political and military relationship, one which I am sure Mr. Lawless will cover in greater depth, is the question of transitioning the operational control of Republic of Korea forces in war-time to an independent command structure in contrast to today's Combined Forces Command arrangement. This stems from a key platform position President Roh Moo-hyun promoted during his campaign for President in 2002. We are now working out the details to fulfill that request, because it makes sense in the context of our 21st Century partnership.

This is an issue that has excited a number of public protests and engendered press comment. I realize that for many Koreans contemplating the end of this arrangement is difficult. It is important for Koreans to understand that it is the United States' enduring commitment to the defense of the Republic of Korea -- not a military headquarters -- that has safeguarded their country for more than fifty years. At the same time, we don't accept the view that this arrangement, which has worked well, has somehow diminished the ROK's sovereignty or made it less of a country.

There has also been significant discussion on the timing of the transfer. When President Bush and President Roh met at the White House on September 14 they agreed that it should not become a political issue. Decisions about the placement of our troops and the size of our troops will be made in consultation with the South Korean government. We will work in a consultative way at the appropriate level of government to come up with an appropriate date. We will also be looking to the government of South Korea to provide an adequate share of the extra costs associated with stationing U.S. troops there.

While I am discussing our security strategy in the context of our modernizing alliance, I think it is also noteworthy that the ROK's national security strategy is consistent with the U.S.

effort to pursue strategic flexibility in the region. We respect the Korean position that it won't be drawn into a conflict in Northeast Asia against the will of the Korean people. In turn, Korea has demonstrated its respect, given the range of challenges from the war on terrorism to humanitarian operations in response to natural disasters, for U.S. forces to be flexibly deployed across regions and different parts of the globe.

Looking further into the future, these developments in the U.S.-ROK military alliance could evolve toward a new cooperative structure of security in Northeast Asia. The ultimate destination is not yet clear; it could be a formal institution, or perhaps just a series of informal relationships. However, I believe that there may be opportunities to create new multilateral mechanisms in Northeast Asia that would help promote cooperative relations among China, Korea, Japan, and the United States. Such a mechanism could also help address the inevitable regional frictions that can and will arise and provide a forum for improving mutual understanding.

The six-party talks have demonstrated that when there are common interests, the major players in Northeast Asia can work together to address problems. I believe this framework has the potential to develop into a mechanism that can cooperatively manage change on the Korean Peninsula, as well as usefully address a range of functional issues in the sub-region from energy and environment to economic and financial cooperation.

Meanwhile, we are also working with Koreans as a force for peace in the global community. Koreans have participated alongside Americans in UN peacekeeping missions around the world and Korea has been a reliable partner in the war on terror. With a contribution of 2,300 troops, the ROK is the third largest coalition partner in Iraq. We hope Korea will continue to make a strong and positive contribution toward building stability and democracy beyond its borders. Indeed, we can work in partnership with Seoul to promote new forms of security cooperation in Northeast Asia as a way of dealing with common threats and overcoming historically-based tensions between Korea and its neighbors.

Challenges to the North

At the core of assuring regional security and stability in Northeast Asia has been confronting the security threat posed by both the strengths and weaknesses of the DPRK. The ROK has been a critical partner in the multilateral effort to end North Korea's nuclear program. Of course, the ROK's relationship with its neighbor to the north is an exceptional case. On the one hand, there is the aspiration of the South Korean people to see their nation made whole once again. On the other, they have first-hand experience – beginning with the outbreak of the Korean War through the present – of the threat posed by North Korea's ideological hostility and its considerable arsenal of conventional and -- as the North continues to boast -- nuclear weapons. The U.S.-ROK alliance was formed as an explicit response to these threats. We remain committed to the fundamental mission of defending the Republic of Korea.

In that vein, as I mentioned earlier, the United States and the ROK have embarked on a major modernization of our alliance that will enhance our ability to fulfill our mission by better exploiting our respective strengths and capabilities. At the same time, we are working with the ROK to end the nuclear threat posed by North Korea. As the U.S., ROK, DPRK, China, Japan, and Russia all agreed in last year's September Joint Statement, North Korea's denuclearization

would open the path to a permanent peace treaty on the Peninsula and mark a profound contribution toward a more stable and secure Northeast Asia. We support the ROK's hope that such a peace treaty would lay the foundations for reunification and extend the peace, prosperity, and freedom that the South enjoys to the rest of the Peninsula.

But our concerns about the behavior and actions of the Pyongyang regime extend beyond denuclearization. The DPRK's economic failings and totalitarian behavior create another set of problems. The U.S. has sought to address the plight of North Korean refugees and implement the 2004 North Korean Human Rights Act, and in doing so we have forged an active dialogue with the ROK on the most effective ways to assist this vulnerable population. The ROK has dedicated significant energy and resources to assisting North Korean asylum seekers. The ROK has resettled more than 8,700 North Korean asylum seekers within its borders, including 1,387 just last year. As you are aware, the U.S. has recently resettled some North Korean refugees in the U.S., and we continue to work with international organizations and countries in the region to look for additional opportunities to assist and resettle North Koreans in need. Even as we move forward with our own program, the ROK will continue to be the primary resettlement destination for North Korean asylum seekers. We will continue to work closely with the ROK on this important Congressional and Administration priority.

In addition to our concerns about North Koreans outside the DPRK, the U.S. and ROK are both focused on the conditions facing North Koreans inside the DPRK. In particular, the U.S. remains concerned about the serious human rights abuses in the DPRK. The ROK also worries about the situation facing North Koreans in the DPRK, but while it shares the same goal of freedom in the North, its approach to the issue has at times differed from our own. We continue to urge the ROK to take a more active stance against DPRK human rights abuses, and to support international measures aimed at addressing the North's abuses.

A Common Interest in Free Trade

You know well that while we are still military allies, we now have a more mature, multi-faceted relationship that features a healthy and strong economic partnership based on a common interest in free trade. It is that partnership that is becoming the driver of our relationship.

We are currently working with the Government of Korea to negotiate a free trade agreement (FTA) that would be the largest U.S. trade agreement in more than a decade. Korea is already our seventh largest trading partner. Through July of this year we exchanged more than \$45 billion worth of goods, and we have a healthy trade in services as well. The United States is the largest foreign investor in Korea, and Korean investment in the United States is growing rapidly. We have never before been so economically vested in each other's well being than we are today. An FTA would further strengthen this economic relationship, bringing benefits to both countries and providing a new pillar for the alliance.

These negotiations will not be easy, as no undertaking of this magnitude is. There are powerful interests lined up on both sides. We are trying to bring down both tariff and non-tariff barriers including in Korea's highly protected agricultural markets and in the automotive sector. Polls in Korea show opinion is about evenly split over the FTA. In a way it has become a proxy for attitudes toward the alliance and for Korea's place in the world in general. Opponents assert it will impoverish Korean farmers and turn Korea into a U.S. economic colony. Others see the

FTA as a historic opportunity for Korea to undertake needed reforms to modernize its economy and become a dynamic economic hub for Northeast Asia.

President Roh has unambiguously aligned himself with the latter, more confident point of view. I too am confident that in the end, that point of view will prevail in Korea, and our commercial relationship will move to a new level, bringing our societies closer together. A successful US-ROK FTA would also have a regional impact. It could become part of a network of FTAs in the Pacific as we have already concluded agreements with Australia and Singapore and are negotiating with Thailand and Malaysia. It might also spur Japan to begin move in this direction.

I know USTR is consulting closely with Congress on these negotiations, as required by Trade Promotion Authority legislation. We need your support and your input to assure that we reach a solid agreement that meets the needs of both parties and will win approval from both legislatures.

Global Concerns

The Alliance has also changed to encompass shared political values. As South Korea has evolved from a military dictatorship to a fully democratic society, the United States and the Republic of Korea have become a more natural pairing, sharing a common respect for human rights, rule of law, and freedom of speech. This, I believe, should provide the foundation for our efforts – in tandem with our joint work within the Six Party Talks – to overcome the division of the Korean Peninsula and bring about genuine reform and respect for human rights in the North.

Furthermore, our common political values have opened the way for the United States and Korea to work together, side-by-side, on an unprecedented number of global issues of common concern. Trafficking in Persons is an excellent example. Our countries stand together in opposing trafficking as an flagrant violation of human rights and as a form of modern-day slavery. Last year, the South Korean National Assembly unanimously passed anti-prostitution and anti-trafficking laws aimed at ending the commercial sexual exploitation of women and girls. In our annual Trafficking in Persons Report, the State Department held up your law as model legislation that the rest of the world should regard as a “best practice.”

The ROK is also a key partner in a number of multilateral efforts to meet the challenges of the 21st century. It is a founding member of the Asia-Pacific Partnership of Clean Development and Climate. South Korea is also actively participating in a host of multilateral efforts to develop and deploy transformational technologies able to rise to the challenge of generating adequate and affordable supplies of clean, sustainable energy that will benefit the environment and could reduce greenhouse gas emissions (GHG). These include the Carbon Sequestration Leadership Forum (CSLF), the International Partnership for a Hydrogen Economy (IPHE), Methane-to-Markets partnership, and the International Thermal Experimental Reactor (ITER) project which seeks to develop clean fusion energy.

The Ties That Bind

Our Alliance has also expanded to include ties of education, culture and family. Koreans continue to flock to the United States to study. There are over a million Korean-Americans living in the United States. They have had a huge positive impact on our country and continue to provide a vital and unique link between the two nations.

There is little doubt that lifting U.S. requirements for Korean visitors to obtain visas for tourism or business travel will provide a tangible boost to a closer bilateral relationship. It is certainly one of our biggest public outreach challenges in Korea. The Koreans are aware of their status as our seventh-largest trading partner, one of our strongest military allies, and one of our primary sources of tourists and foreign students. Korea is also the third-largest contributor of troops to Iraq, after the U.S. and Great Britain, and has been a participant in peacekeeping operations in Afghanistan, East Timor and Africa. So Koreans look at all of this and wonder why they aren't included with Japan and the twenty-six other countries whose people can visit the U.S. without a visa under certain circumstances.

There are a number of requirements to be allowed in the Visa Waiver Program, including, for example: plans to issue an electronic passport; a program to ensure effective border security and law enforcement cooperation with the U.S.; and, a visa refusal rate of less than 3%. The Koreans are developing an electronic passport and expect to have it ready for their general public sometime next year. They've made great efforts to work closely with us on law enforcement and border security, and we have very active cooperation with them. Then there's the refusal rate. It looks as though their refusal rate this year will likely be somewhere around 3.5 percent--a half of one percent too high.

So the Koreans feel some frustration on this issue, particularly since their refusal rate has been under 4% for the past four years. Entry into the Visa Waiver Program is something that would hold tangible benefits for many ordinary Koreans. This administration understands that and President Bush assured President Roh at the summit last week that we intend to work together to see if we can get this issue resolved as quickly as possible once Korea meets the statutory requirements to participate in the program. As a part of this, we are exploring the possibility of commencing the administrative review process for Korea's possible inclusion in the Visa Waiver Program, so that we can promptly move forward on this issue, just as President Bush committed us to doing at the summit. We regularly point out to the Koreans, though, that the law has no wriggle room in it and that there's only so much we can do as long as they're above that three percent.

Fifty years ago, the blood that bound our countries was the blood spilled on the battlefield. Now it is the living blood of families that stretch from Seoul to San Francisco that unites us. Korean culture and American culture are increasingly coming together. Our role as government should be to remove as many obstacles as we can and encourage these exciting and dynamic cultural ties.

Public Diplomacy

At the same time we are coming together, persistent displays of anti-American sentiments sometimes seem to be a regular feature of the political landscape in Korea. I don't believe that across the general population feelings against the United States have actually grown in any significant way. It was, however, something that I took very seriously during my time

there as Ambassador—and I still take it very seriously-- but I think this is something that is, frankly, somewhat misunderstood here in the U.S. The number of Koreans who are truly anti-American is very small. However, the number of people who care about what America does and how we interact with the Republic of Korea is very large—just about everyone in South Korea, really. And Koreans like to express their opinions. They live in a free society and they have that right and they exercise it. Yes, sometimes they protest against the U.S. or one of our policies but they also protest against real estate taxes, education reforms, fishing regulations, labor laws and a whole range of issues wholly unrelated to the alliance.

Our two countries have a tremendous connection, encompassing the tens of thousands Korean of students who have studied here, the many Koreans who have relatives living here, or the personal relationships forged between members of the two militaries. Many Koreans have a great affection for the U.S. even if they don't always agree with us and I was reminded of that often when I was ambassador there.

I would say though, that there is something that we could do better in talking to Korea and that is to focus even more on the future. The Korean war and the alliance of the last fifty years are very important and we should not forget them, but older Koreans already understand and appreciate that history. We also need to make our case to the younger generation of Koreans -- especially those in their twenties and thirties -- and I don't think bringing up the war is the most effective way to reach them. How many of you have ever tried to convince a twenty-year old that something was important by citing something that happened in 1951? I can tell you that it isn't any more likely to work with Korean twenty-year olds than with American twenty-year olds.

We have to focus on the future of the relationship and how its changing and is going to meet the future needs of our two countries. Korea has become a very technologically sophisticated society and Koreans, very rightly, have a lot of confidence about their future. Our message to them should be that we share this confidence. Ambassador Vershbow and our embassy in Seoul are working hard to get that message out; the good news is that we have already made significant progress on telling this very compelling story.

I would add that Congress has an important role to play in communicating with the Korean public. When members travel to Korea or meet visiting Korean legislators or officials here in the U.S. it sends a strong signal that the relationship is important to us, so I would like to acknowledge the role you have also played. Notably, your recent visit, Mr. Chairman, to Korea generated a lot of attention there. Visits such as those have an enormous impact on Korean perceptions of U.S. priorities and policies.

In this respect, a key goal of our public outreach efforts is to encourage continued direct contact between Korean citizens and U.S. officials and to help advance our foreign policy interests in Korea and strengthen our alliance. One new way we hope to do this is by establishing a diplomatic presence in Korea's second largest city, Busan. By inaugurating what is called an "American Presence Post" (APP) there, we hope to reach out to an under-targeted segment of the Korean population that has experienced a significant and generational shift away from the traditionally positive feelings towards the U.S. Furthermore, an additional diplomatic post in Korea would demonstrate an expanding commitment to a critical ally in a region where the rise of China and instability of North Korea create a possibly unfavorable geopolitical

outlook. Finally, the establishment of an APP in Korea's largest port and main transport center for U.S. imports will benefit our growing business and commercial and contribute to the success of our Free Trade Agreement negotiations..

In response to our Secretary's call for new ways to make diplomatic inroads into under-represented regions, we have already begun preliminary logistical investigations for the opening of an APP in Busan, Korea that is required before we can formally submit the proposal to Congress for approval. I look forward to your future support in what I fully expect to be a rewarding foreign policy project.

Conclusion

Our relationship with the Republic of Korea is one with a long and honorable past; but more importantly, an even more promising future. It is blossoming into a maturing global partnership, and we are at a point in time where we can start to translate those exciting ideas into actions that will benefit both countries and our close relationship. I look forward to doing what I can to work with you to seize this historic opportunity.

I would be pleased to answer any questions you may have.